The family's role in socializing youth

The basic educational institution—the family—provides the fundamental apprenticeship for life. Under the right conditions, it prepares young people to realize their potential and assume useful roles as adults in society. However, the relationship of today's young people with the older generation, and in particular with their families, has become increasingly fragile. The socialization of youth is no longer a simple transmission of accepted values and attitudes.

Each individual's life is shaped by cultural norms and values and by social interaction. The family is at the core of this process and bears the primary responsibility for the socialization of youth. It is within the family, with all its echoing relationships, its reflections of a larger world, and its responsiveness to the internal world of each of its members, that the initial learning by each individual takes place.

"Learning begins at birth" is an undisputed concept: it is well established that the period from birth to the age of six is critical in the formation of intelligence, personality and social behaviour. It is in the family that the child's self-understanding and self-esteem are developed. The learning that occurs in the early months and years of life will either enhance or handicap learning throughout later life.

Tradition and change

The family is responsible for transmitting social and cultural values. Traditions are learned and enriched in families and are very much part of the inheritance passed on between generations.

At the same time, the family is a powerful agent for renewal. It regenerates and changes society by challenging accepted wisdom, expanding knowledge and scrutinizing the functioning of existing institutions. From this perspective, families are primary agents of constructive change and development.

All members of the family influence each other in complex ways. The impact of children's behaviour on their parents' personalities should not be forgotten. Children also socialize their parents in many ways. Parents learn from their children about child development, peer and sibling relationships, school, fashion and changes in society. Children serve as carriers of emerging trends, through their exposure to schools, peers and the media. In particular, immigrant and refugee parents often learn their new country's language, customs and culture from their children.

Family and education

In modern societies, the family has been performing a fundamental role in education. Despite growing support for the view that education is an essential right of all individuals, the decisions of parents still play a pivotal role in determining the amount and quality of education that any child receives, either formally or informally.

Several factors play a role in these decisions, including the economic situation of parents, their social traditions, their degree of exposure to the forces of modernization, and their level of appreciation of the importance of schooling, as well as their general attitudes to the values that education should impart.

In cultures where education is highly valued, it has been observed that a stable family system is a major factor in encouraging children to acquire education. In contrast, the decline in educational attainment in some countries has been in part attributed to the decline of family support systems.

Families can also constitute an essential mechanism in teaching respect for the human rights of all individuals. But negative circumstances, such as social problems, exploitation and abuse, are also often evident within families. It is therefore necessary to foster the development of perceptions regarding families and relationships within the family that are consistent with basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Challenges to the family

The tremendous transformations occurring in and around the family, combined with the early social maturation of youth, their ability to earn incomes independently of the family, and the development of a youth culture, have all diminished the influence of the family in the socialization process. Schools, peer groups and television all compete with the family in the socialization function.

At the same time, new education technologies, particularly the introduction of computer science and computer-aided instruction in schools and universities, along with the increasing variety of video and audio equipment and programmes, are changing the socialization process during school years in ways that are still being explored.

These changes are often so rapid that parents are not able to identify with their children's educational experience. Parents then face severe challenges attempting to play a supportive role in educating their children in a changed and fluid educational environment.

Another challenge is posed by single parenthood, which places a greater burden on the parent to feed, shelter and educate children, as well as provide emotional support, often without the assistance of the other parent or indeed the State.

The current financial crisis faced by many countries limits the extent of their commitment to families and education. But even in times of financial difficulty, it would be short-sighted to reduce that commitment, because education is the main way to build up the future of the child and society.

The United Nations has been increasingly concerned with such issues, and is, for instance, assisting Governments, particularly in developing countries, in formulating national policies which include measures to support the socialization function of the family.

The year 1995—the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations—will see three major events in the social domain: the World Summit for Social Development, the Ninth Congress on Crime Prevention and the Treatment of Offenders and the Fourth World Conference on Women. That year will also mark the tenth anniversary of the International Youth Year, observed by the United Nations in 1985. Following the International Year of the Family in 1994, 1995 will provide the United Nations, in cooperation with the many organizations dealing with youth issues, yet another occasion for assessing existing global activities and launching new ones to strengthen youth-related concerns.

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